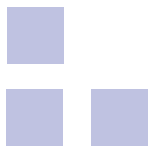




engage research

points of view



TIME TO CONSULT IF BRANDS ARE TO GAIN MORE INFORMED INSIGHTS

Brands should consider adopting a more "consultative" approach to certain research projects as a way of yielding a more informed and considered level of insight and there are lessons to be learned from the deliberative approaches used in public consultations in social research.

Accepted theory often states that respondents are incapable of solving marketing issues. This can be true, but it does not follow that they cannot comment usefully upon them; the deliberative approaches employed by social researchers expose respondents to often hugely complicated public policy issues and yet overcome this complexity to produce valuable and constructive insight. In a deliberative methodology, respondents are carefully exposed to the issues over a period of time, feeding back each time they reach a new level of understanding. It is powerful but can be ponderous.

However, with careful staging and clever pre tasking, deliberative techniques can yield advanced insights for the commercial world quickly and easily. One reason for this is that consumers start with a far better understanding of the issues than is usually possible in public sector work. Whilst they may not know exactly why they feel the way they do about a particular product or brand, or indeed what makes them buy it, they do interact with it on a regular basis - and, as we have seen, at an increasingly intellectual level.



This is where the pre task comes in - a series of exercises, usually ethnographic or webnographic, which are carefully designed to reveal consumers' current behaviour to researchers and stakeholders, but which at the same time slowly focus the consumers' attention on their own behaviour, prompting them to begin to question and analyse it. Outputs from the pre-task are then used to generate stimulus which is used at the start of the face to face sessions in order to generate discussion and debate, until respondents are closely attuned to their individual brand and product needs. This whole process follows the same path as much deliberative work, with

the key difference being that it is the respondents, rather than the research team, that supplies the necessary information for increased understanding of the issues.

In a standard methodology, respondents would be discarded at this point, considered too sensitised to the issues to be able to provide insight untainted by the research process. However, it is this very sensitivity which equips them to contribute to the consultative session - their deeper awareness of the way in which they consume a clients' products or brands means that they can take on the role of

'consumer consultants' and provide a much deeper level of feedback.



It is the moderators' job to ensure that these outputs remain focussed and valuable without killing off enthusiasm. Establishing a clear blueprint for success at the beginning of each session is key - illustrated 'WILF' (What I'm Looking For) boards, explained in the introduction session and kept on view throughout the research, are particularly helpful. It also helps if, wherever possible, the moderator can share some of the thinking behind a particular issue or approach - the respondent arguing passionately for a multi-million pound ad campaign will change track happily if the cost implications are briefly explained, but can feel crushed if the subject is changed without explanation.

For this reason, consultative moderation can work particularly well in the experiential setting where there is a strong element of cooperation between clients and respondents, as the moderators can draw upon clients as necessary to explain the marketing context. At the same time, the consultative approach puts respondents on an equal footing with stakeholders by giving them expert status, whilst the experiential buzz ensures that they are equally involved with and committed to the process.

The result is a strongly welded stakeholder-consumer partnership, where each party has clearly delineated yet complementary roles - a switch from the transactional to relationship approach in research which is the first step towards achieving the same vital switch in the wider marketing context.